

molecular interventions

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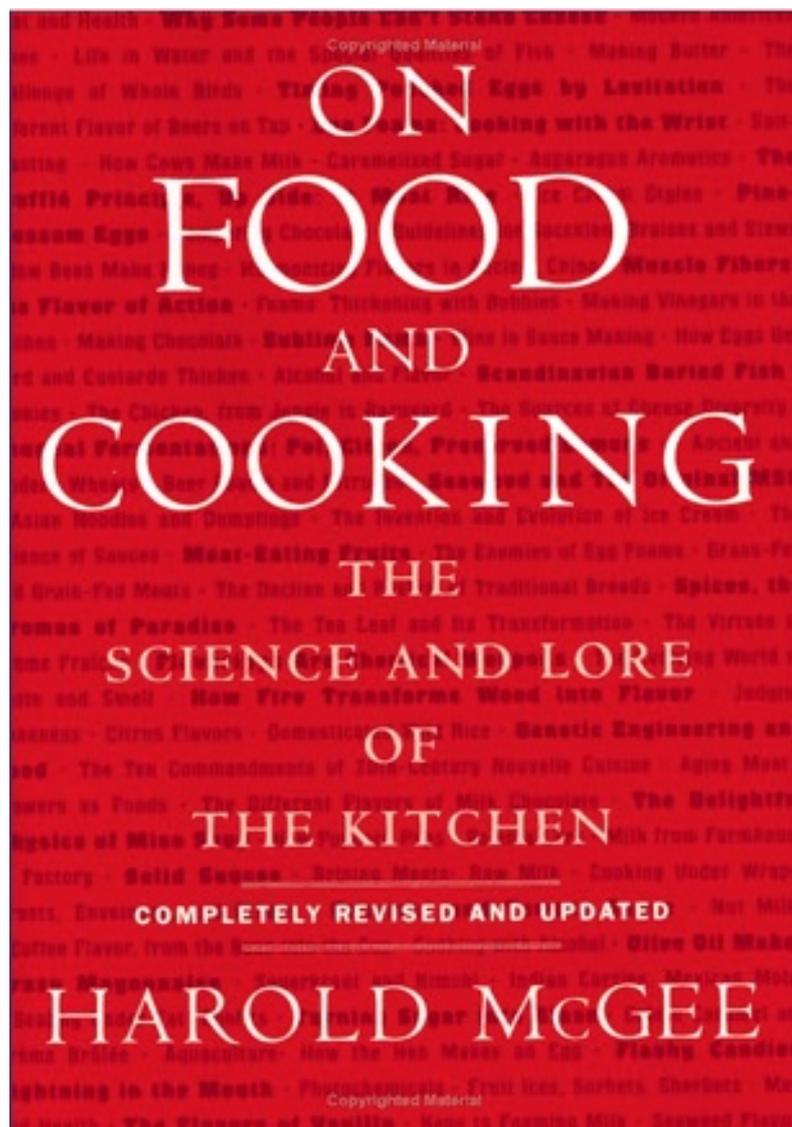
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Gift Books by Gifted Authors

John W. Nelson, PhD¹ and John S. Lazo, PhD²

Author Affiliations

Feasting on Knowledge



On Food and Cooking: The Science and Lore of the Kitchen (Revised and updated

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edition). Harold McGee. New York: Scribner; 2004. 896 pages. \$40.00. ISBN: 0684800012

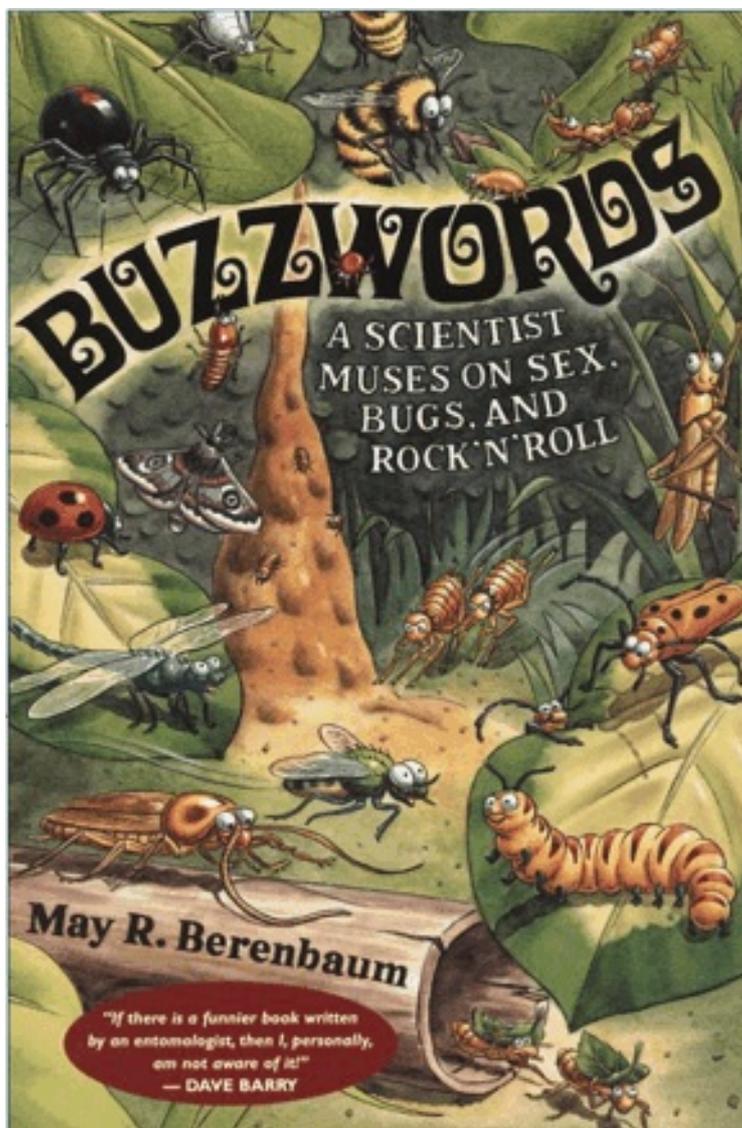
We all remember our first time, don't we? A moment of self-actualization. Of course, I refer to the experience of opening an exceptionally well-designed textbook. A book so well planned and conceived that its text and dynamic illustrations jumped off the pages and conveniently downloaded themselves into our graduate school brains without much effort. For me, it was Stryer's *Biochemistry* (3rd edition). We are fortunate to experience such an epiphany once in a lifetime. Dear reader, let me share my second epiphany with you.

Last winter, on a terribly snowy night, I waited among a throng (I was number 437 out of 750) to have Alton Brown autograph his series of well-received cookbooks that, pleasing for a scientist, explain the hows and whys of better methods of cooking. I meandered the bookstore killing time when I chanced upon Harold McGee's *On Food and Cooking*. Not previously knowing of the book, I perused it—it had the word “science” in the subtitle—and stood transfixed for thirty minutes. I read about two types of pectin: one natural, the other a methoxy-modified version that requires calcium in order to form a cross-linked network. Page 186 contained a table on toxins found in shellfish, including okadaic acid and amnesia-producing domoic acid. Do you know why blanching broccoli makes it bright green? I do now, and it has nothing to do with chlorophyll itself. Rather, gas-filled spaces between plant cells expand, release their gas, and collapse, allowing the chlorophyll to be seen more clearly (p. 279). There's everybody's favorite: the table on the relative pungency (i.e., perceived painful heat) of differing varieties of chillis (p. 421)—note the correct spelling: “chilli” refers to chile peppers, whereas “chili” is the mainstay of summer cook-offs. The section on different brewing methods for differing types of coffees and teas (in the chapter entitled “Flavorings from Plants”) was especially interesting for an inveterate caffeine imbiber like me. But make no mistake, *On Food* is no compendium of trivial facts and “did-you-knows?” This is a serious book about a serious topic: making our meals better.

The book is full of excellent drawings of molecular interactions and vignettes from centuries-old cookbooks that provide fascinating glimpses into the similarities and differences of how we cook today. This book receives my highest recommendation. Buy one for yourself and one for an avid scientist-cook friend; you won't want to lend out your copy. By the way, Alton Brown, who was very kind and said he'd happily stay all night signing books for those people who straggled in because of the terribly bad weather, noted that he and others interested in the science of cooking owe a large debt of gratitude to McGee. —*JW Nelson*

The Buzz about “Buzzwords”





Buzzwords: A Scientist Muses on Sex, Bugs, and Rock 'N' Roll. May Berenbaum. Washington, DC: National Academy Press; 2000. 320 pages. \$14.95. ISBN: 0309068355

Why should you consider a book published in 2000 for this holiday? Good question. Perhaps the subtitle (which you probably missed) entitled “A Scientist Muses on Sex, Bugs, and Rock 'N' Roll” eluded you. Or maybe you missed Dave Barry’s review: “If there is a funnier book written by an entomologist then I, personally, am not aware of it!” OK, if this does not stimulate you to pick up this ideal holiday present for a friend or aspiring scientists, then here are a few other reasons. First, it is quite authoritative, being authored by a member of the National Academy of Sciences. Second, it really is the funniest book available about bugs and drugs. You will learn about “Over-the-counter insects.” Now, couldn’t you use that in some class you are about to teach? If the students are really bored, how about “Roach Clips and Other Short Subjects”? Any teacher of graduate or medical school pharmacology will find this book a fabulous present. The “Popular Misconception” section in the chapter entitled “A Word to Freshmen” is especially refreshing. Don’t miss it. It is a gift that keeps on giving. —*JS Lazo*

The Blame Game





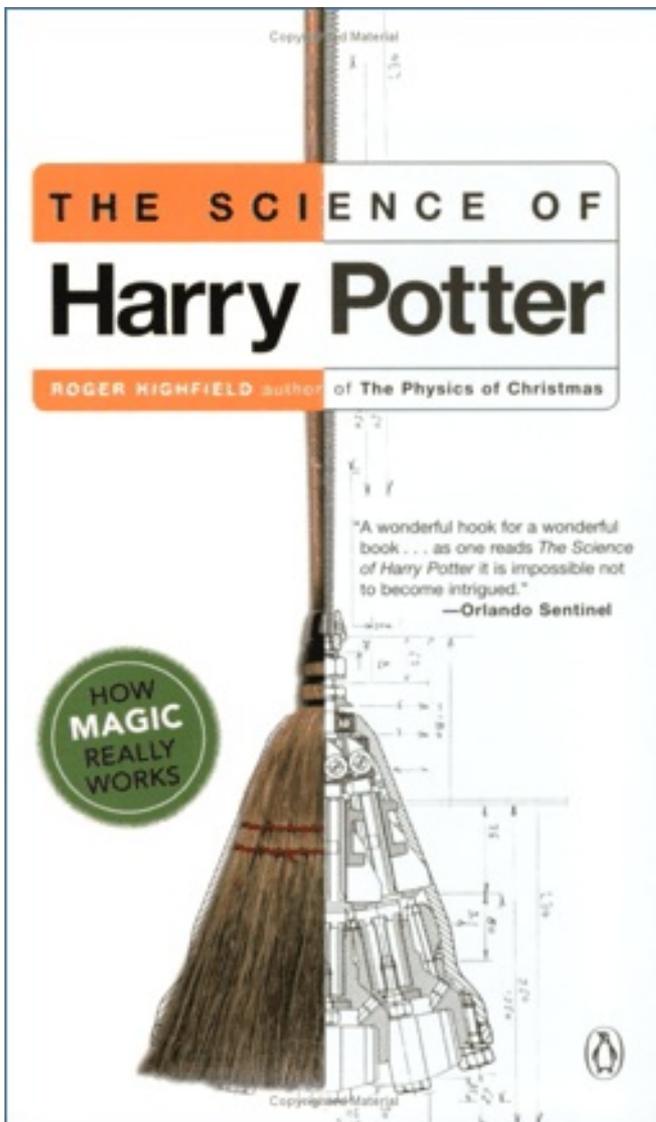
When Germs Travel: Six Major Epidemics That Have Invaded America and the Fears They Have Unleashed. Howard Markel. New York: Vintage Press; 2005. 288 pages. \$13.95. ISBN: 0375726020

The title *When Germs Travel* is not about the rapidity with which diseases spread across continents. The sensationalistic subtitle better describes the work's raison d'être. Howard Markel, a clinician and medical historian, describes small outbreaks of five diseases (and the more pervasive HIV/AIDS) in the US and the fear, suspicion, and distrust that grew to form walls of bigotry separating the American populace from immigrants thought to have borne the disease. Indeed, herein lies the book's strength and the reason it is recommended: Markel digs up historical accounts of the medical, governmental, and community responses to each outbreak. A bright light is shone on constant in-fighting between clashing egos, a lack of adequate public health infrastructure including opposing directives, and upwelling clamor to quarantine all immigrants within a defined area without like quarantine of others. The other strength of Markel's book is in choosing a handful of individuals who harbored the particular disease and how their lives were up-ended. In other words, the diseases are personalized as opposed to, perhaps, one's inclination to view the diseases in simplistic terms of us vs the bacterial/viral scourges to be eradicated. It's worth noting that Markel isn't reluctant to discuss his own misdiagnosis of an outbreak. He erroneously reported an outbreak of cholera (it was rotavirus) in Detroit based solely on symptoms (some of which were common to those associated with cholera), no

microscopic evidence for support, and the fact that some of the patients had recently come from a Rwandan refugee camp where cholera had been reported before. He acted to prevent a possibly looming crisis, so he might be forgiven for jumping to an unsubstantiated conclusion.

There are a few eyebrow-raising errors, but these don't detract from the author's strong message that when confronted with fear and the unknown, people tend to hold onto those things that bring reassurance and comfort, which often include blame and bigotry. If after reading this, you are looking for a follow-up read on a similar topic, I recommend Garrett's excellent book on the utter necessity of a health infrastructure, *Betrayal of Trust: The Collapse of Global Public Health*. —JW Nelson

Two By Highfield





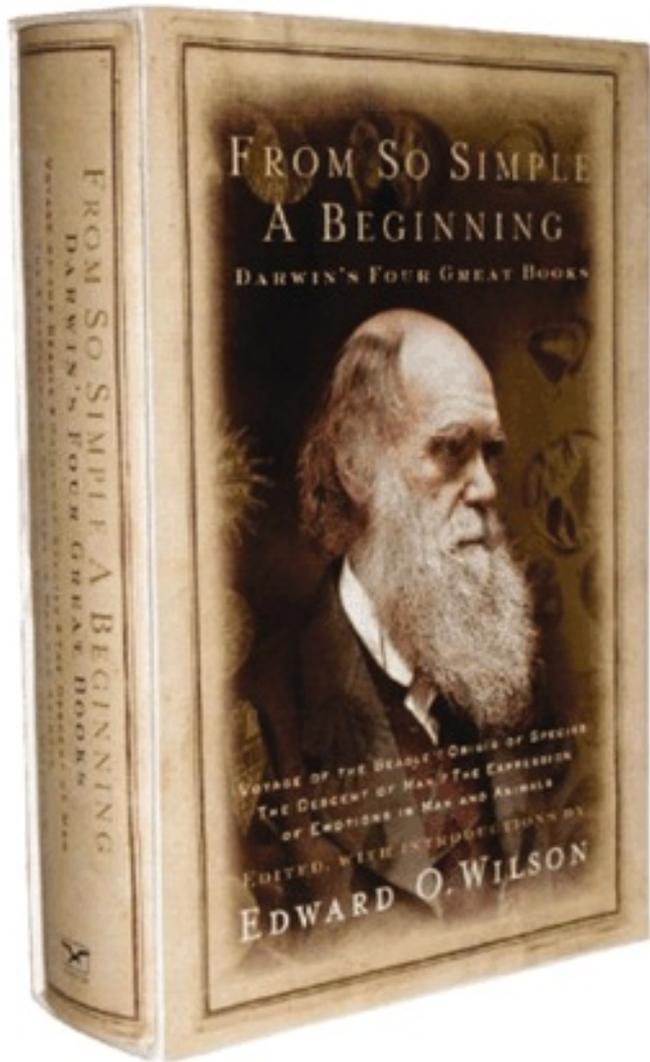
The Science of Harry Potter: How Magic Really Works. Roger Highfield. New York: Penguin (Non-Classics) Reprint edition; 2003. 368 pages. \$15.00. ISBN: 0142003557

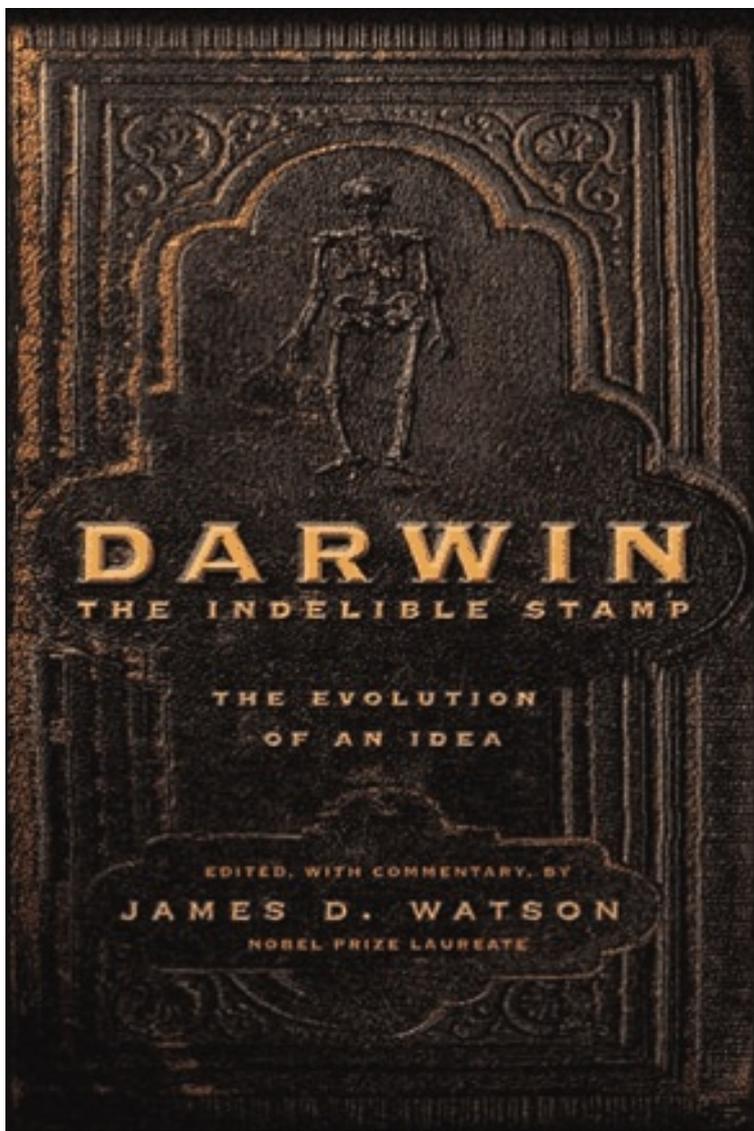
The Physics of Christmas: From the Aerodynamics of Reindeer to the Thermodynamics of Turkey. Roger Highfield. Back Bay Books; 1999. 320 pages. \$16.99. ISBN: 0316366951

Although they weren't released this year, two of Roger Highfield's books remain quite timely: *The Science of Harry Potter: How Magic Really Works* and *The Physics of Christmas: From the Aerodynamics of Reindeer to the Thermodynamics of Turkey*. Highfield begins with an item found in the Harry Potter stories and runs with it, describing how such a thing might be engineered to work with today's technology and then moves on to adjacent topics at the forefront of research, just barely maintaining the thread with the original Potter idea. For example, the sorting hat and what it does moves into a description of electroencephalography and new research using SQUIDS (superconducting quantum interference devices), which "can turn a change in magnetic field generated by a living brain into a change in voltage that varies over time." In *The Physics of Christmas*, Highfield discusses, among many other things, the tastes of Christmas and new findings on olfaction and gustation. He even mentions the work of Luca Turin, who believes that vibrations of molecules rather than their shape are more important for the detection and classification of smells and tastes. Controversial stuff to be sure, but an exciting read at the same time. These books are by no means written in a stream-of-consciousness style, but one can't help but get

caught in the current of “where will he go with this one?” expectation. Both books confidently recommended. —*JW Nelson*

Survival of the Fitter





From So Simple a Beginning: Darwin's Four Great Books (Slipcase edition). Charles Darwin. Edward O. Wilson (Editor); New York: W. W. Norton & Company; 2005. 1706 pages. \$39.95. ISBN: 0393061345

Darwin: The Indelible Stamp; The Evolution Of An Idea. Charles Darwin. James D. Watson (Editor); Philadelphia: Running Press; 2005. 1260 pages. \$29.95. ISBN: 0762421363

What do you buy the intelligent, literate (high school or undergraduate) student who you'd like to see develop an interest in science? Easy! Two new tomes have been published that contain Darwin's four great works: *The Voyage of the Beagle*, *On the Origin of Species*, *The Descent of Man*, and *The Emotions in Man and Animals*. Your choice will be to decide which editor you prefer: Edward O. Wilson or James D. Watson.

Wilson's edition is handsomely slipcased and recommends itself as a gift for the budding scientist-to-be. On the other hand, Watson's less expensive book has an embossed cover suggesting a venerable book of unquestioned importance—which, of course, it is (they are). Tie.

Footnotes appear on the same page that they are called out on in Watson. In Wilson, the footnotes are collected as end-notes and no call-outs are provided in the text.

Watson contains a letter Darwin published in *Nature* on sexual selection, appended to *The Descent of Man*. Advantage Watson.

Wilson has less text per page and employs an off-white paper, making reading a bit easier on the eye. Wilson provides a very useful index that allows a reader to find topics with ease. Although figures are very well-reproduced in Watson, those in Wilson are better in terms of cleaner lines and enhanced shading. Point to Wilson.

I found Watson's commentaries much more informative and engaging; however,

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